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ABSTRACT

A study examined the grading patterns in basic public speaking and communication courses. It was hypothesized that female students would receive higher grades in basic performance and nonperformance communication courses than would male students. The grades for one academic quarter in two nonperformance communication courses and one public speaking course were examined, for a total of 554 male and 466 female grades. The results indicated that females received higher grades than did males, regardless of the course in which they were enrolled. Women received an average grade between "B" and "B-" in the three courses while men received an average grade between "B-" and "C+." The differences in grades yields a number of observations. The grades appear to be highest in the public speaking performance course, most sections of which were taught by graduate teaching assistants rather than by fulltime faculty. While earlier studies suggested that women might be more competent communicators than men and thus receive higher grades, this explanation is weakened by these results, unless the explanation is broadened to suggest that women are also better at discriminating between testable and extraneous lecture information. However, the notion of compliance--that women receive higher grades because they are more willing to "play by the rules" of a particular course--is strengthened by the study. (HTH)

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THE INFLUENCE OF STUDENT GENDER ON GRADING IN THE BASIC PERFORMANCE AND NONPERFORMANCE COMMUNICATION COURSES

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THE INFLUENCE OF STUDENT GENDER ON GRADING IN THE BASIC PERFORMANCE AND NONPERFORMANCE COMMUNICATION COURSES

Two traditional and fundamental goals of the basic communication course are to introduce students to the field of communication and to meet basic communication proficiency needs. Thus, when establishing a basic course curriculum in communication training, institutions typically are responsible for teaching the theory and principles that are well established in their discipline and for meeting basic communication needs of their students. Some departments combine theory and practice within single basic courses while other institutions offer a number of basic courses--some which are primarily theoretical in nature and others which devote maximum time to the development of skills. Basic course textbooks similarly reflect this trend as some of them are more appropriate for a theoretical course (cf. Miller & Steinberg, 1975; Knapp, 1978; Wilmot, 1980), some are designed for a performance course (Heun & Heun, 1979; Ehninger, Gronbeck, & Monroe, 1980; Jabusch & Littlejohn, 1981; Nelson & Pearson, 1981), and some are well adapted to the course which combines theory and practice (cf. Ruffner & Burgoon, 1981; Weaver, 1981; Pearson & Nelson, 1982).

The relative contributions of theory to practice in the basic course have been assessed in a number of national surveys in the past 25 years (cf. Dedmon, 1965; Dedmon & Frandsen, 1965; Hargis, 1956; Jones, 1955; London, 1963,

1964; Gibson, Kline & Gruner, 1974; Gibson, Gruner, Brooks, & Petrie, 1970; Berryman & Weaver, 1979; and Gibson, Gruner, Hanna, Smythe, & Hayes, 1980). In 1973 (Gibson, Kline, & Gruner, 1974), when all of the various kinds of basic courses that were offered were considered together, most of them (76%) offered more practice than theory. In 1978 (Gibson, Gruner, Hanna, Smythe, & Hayes, 1980), when all of the basic course options were combined, a smaller percentage included more practice than theory (54%) than five years earlier. While these two studies suggest a trend toward more theory than practice in the basic course, two recent studies suggest that both students and alumni prefer more practice than theory. In one study, students favored more practice than theory (53%) or an equal amount of theory and practice (45%) (Pearson, Sorenson, & Nelson, 1981). In a second study, alumni favored more practice than theory (79%) or an equal amount of theory and practice (20%) (Sorenson & Pearson, 1981). Neither students nor alumni favor the basic course which is highly theoretical in nature.

Grading patterns in the basic course have similarly been examined in research reports. One line of research has focused on the effect of the speaker's gender on his or her grade. These studies have suggested that women receive higher ratings than do men (Barker, 1966; Pearson, 1980b, 1981a); that female speakers appear to receive more positive comments than do male speakers, even when grades are held

constant (Sprague, 1971; Pearson, 1975); and that female speakers obtain significantly higher scores on three dimensions of credibility--trustworthiness, competence, and dynamism--than do male speakers (Vigliano, 1974). One study suggests that no difference appears in the persuasiveness of male and female speakers (Sloman, 1974). Most recently, women were shown to receive higher grades in both the basic public speaking course and the basic interpersonal communication course (Pearson & Nelson, 1981).

Although limited in generalizability, a sizable body of literature in elementary education suggests a rationale for the difference in the grading of male and female students. Differential treatment of students by the teacher appears to occur on the basis of sex even when the male and female students have similar intellectual ability (Lobaugh, 1942; Swenson, 1942; Shinnerer, 1944; Carter, 1952). Teacher disapproval occurs more frequently with males than females (Lippit & Gold, 1959; de Groat & Thompson, 1949; Meyer & Thompson, 1956) and teachers are more likely to use a harsh tone when criticizing boys than girls (Spaulding, 1963; Waetjen, 1962). Student behavior, rather than student sex, explains differential treatment, on the elementary level (Davis & Slobodian, 1967; Jackson, Silberman, & Wolfson, 1969; Brophy & Good, 1970; Good & Brophy, 1971; Martin, 1972). High achieving males receive the most favorable teacher treatment while low achieving males receive the

least favorable treatment (Good, Sikes, & Brophy, 1973). This finding contradicts, to some extent, the earlier suggestion that boys receive inferior treatment from teachers and suggests that earlier results were due to lack of categorization within each sex.

Researchers who have analyzed differences in grades for male and female communication students have similarly attempted to identify those behaviors which lead to higher grades. A low positive correlation occurs between verbal comprehension and general reasoning with speaking ability for male speakers, but no significant correlation exists for female subjects (Ball, 1958). Persons who are sexist appear to receive lower grades than do persons who are nonsexist (Pearson, 1981a).

A number of explanations can be posited for the higher grades that female students receive. Earlier research suggested that sexism might predict differential grading (Sprague, 1971; Pearson, 1975), but a recent study demonstrated that sexism has weak explanatory power (Pearson, 1980b). A second explanation is that female students may be more effective as public speakers and as interpersonal communicators (Pearson, 1981b, Pearson & Nelson, 1981). A third explanation is that female students may simply be more compliant than male students. A recent report suggests that persons who are sex-typed as feminine receive higher scores than do persons who are sex-typed as masculine and that compliance is a

component of the feminine sex-role stereotype (Pearson, 1980a). Regardless of the explanation, it appears clear that women receive higher grades than do men in the basic public speaking and basic interpersonal communication performance courses.

Grading in the public speaking class has been systematically examined. The development of the basic interpersonal communication course allowed the examination of the grading patterns for men and women in this basic performance course. The increase of theoretical survey courses or the addition of theory courses to existing basic skills-oriented courses allows us to examine the grading patterns that emerge for men and women in this format as well. The purpose of this study is to determine the influence of student gender on grading in the basic performance and nonperformance communication course. We hypothesize that

H_1: Females will receive higher grades in the basic performance course and the basic nonperformance communication course than will men.

METHOD

In order to test the research hypothesis, we examined the grades given during Fall Quarter 1981 at a large midwestern university. The grades in three different courses were examined: an introductory course to speech communication which surveyed the field, was taught in a large lecture format, and required no performances; an introductory course to mass communication which surveyed the field, was taught in a large lecture format, and required no performances; and an introduction to public speaking course which was taught in small sections and required public speaking performances. The final grades of 1021 students were examined: one hundred and ninety-six of the students were enrolled in the introductory speech communication course, 214 were enrolled in the introductory mass communication course, and 610 were enrolled in the public speaking course. Five hundred and fifty-four students were males and 466 were females.

The 2 X 3 analysis of variance placed gender of the student (male or female) and type of course (speech communication survey, mass communication survey, or public speaking performance) as the independent variables. The dependent variable was the course grade (A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, C-, D+, D, D-, F, or I). The results that follow are based on this analysis.

RESULTS

The results of this study demonstrate that females receive higher grades than do males, regardless of the course in which they are enrolled ($p = .0031$; see Table 1). The

analysis also suggests that the type of course causes significant differences in grades, but this difference can not be legitimately interpreted. The differences among the three classes does not allow comparisons of the type offered in this analysis; the classes were entered as an independent variable in order to clarify the potential gender differences among classes. The usefulness of dissecting the data on the basis of type of class is demonstrated in Table 2 which provides the mean grade for male and female students in each of the three classes. We observe in this table that females received higher scores in all three classes than did males in the same courses (1 = A and 12 = F). A smaller difference occurred in the mass communication survey course than in the other two courses. The interaction between the two independent variables was not significant which suggests that the gender differences that were determined were not contaminated by the different classes (see Table 1).

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis, that female students would receive higher grades than males in either performance or nonperformance basic courses, was confirmed. Women received an average grade of 4.755 (between a "B" and a "B-") in the three courses while men received an average of about 5.303 (between a "B-" and a "C+"). This finding is consistent with past studies which suggest that female students receive higher grades than male students in speech communication courses.

We might also note, in passing, that significant differences occurred in the grading among the three classes, but these differences cannot be legitimately interpreted as we mentioned earlier.

As we examine the differences in grades given in the three classes to the two genders in Table 2, we can make a number of observations. First, women received higher grades in all three classes. Second, the grades appear to be lowest in the introductory speech communication survey course, second lowest in the mass communication survey course, and highest in the public speaking performance course. The two survey courses were taught by experienced full-time faculty members and most of the sections of the public speaking course were taught by graduate teaching assistants. The grades in the survey course were based on multiple-choice and true-false examinations and papers while the grades in the public speaking course were based on examinations, papers, and speaking performances in the classroom. We also observe that an approximately equal number of males and females were enrolled in the two survey courses, but significantly more men than women were enrolled in the public speaking course.

Earlier studies which examined specific communication behaviors such as public speaking or interpersonal communication suggested that women might be more competent communicators than men and thus received higher grades because of ability.

The explanation of competence in communication appears to be weakened in this study, unless we broaden the notion to suggest that women are also more sensitive to cues from lecturers and instructors. For instance, women are able to discriminate between information that is testable and that which the lecturer deems as less important in the classroom setting in a more capable manner. Or, women are better able to understand instructions or explanations for written assignments than are men. In this sense, then, women may still be viewed to be more competent in communication.

On the other hand, the notion of compliance seems to be strengthened by this research. Women may receive higher scores in communication classes--those which have performance aspects and those which do not--because they are more willing to "play by the rules." Women may be more willing to be prompt in their written work, to be copious in their note-taking, and to be more studious for examinations. The context of the classroom may be the strongest overriding factor which explains the differences between the grades that men and women receive in the basic communication courses. In the same way that one author was prompted to refer to elementary education as "feminized," the beginning college level communication courses may be providing a situation in which women can excel over men.

The consistent finding that female students receive higher grades than male students was again demonstrated

in this study. We may be closer to an explanation for this finding than we have been in the past. We now know, for example, that the grading differences encompass both the cognitive and the behavioral domains, not only the behavioral domains tested in the past. However, the results do not reveal if differential grading patterns are a result of the classroom context or the ability to effectuate specific communication competencies, including sensitivity in listening and receiving cues from the instructor.

The difficulty of disentangling this problem is exacerbated by the culture and socialization processes. For instance, a variety of studies have demonstrated that when the same essay is attributed to a male author it receives higher scores than when it is attributed to a female author, because of the bias in our culture against females (cf. Goldberg, 1968). Similarly, male sources of messages receive higher competence ratings than do female sources when each is identified to be the author of a persuasive message (Miller & McReynolds, 1973). In addition to research studies, we observe that fewer women present public speeches than do men in their work. The small number of women in public office, for instance, strengthens the point of view that men, rather than women are suited for public speaking. Indeed, we observed in this study that a much larger proportion of the public speaking class was populated by men than by women, while the course was not favored by traditionally male departments nor required

for more men than women. Thus, people in our culture may perceive that public speaking, as one communication context, may be more appropriate for men than for women. At the same time, women receive higher grades in this activity in the classroom. These kinds of contradictions allow us to hold equally firmly to two different perspectives. First, we might posit that women are more competent communicators as demonstrated in a variety of studies in controlled classroom situations, and they are only judged to be less competent in public life because of the prejudice against women. We can also hold, based on the same data, that women are not as competent as men in communication as demonstrated in the situation which occurs, after college, and that women's higher grades in the communication classroom are an artifact created by the context and their high compliance. Our task in resolving this dilemma is still incomplete.

Table 1--Analysis of Variance for the Variables of Interest*

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	F	Significance
Gender of Student	67.21	1	8.82	.0031
Type of Course	1054.05	2	69.12	.0001
Gender X Course	23.10	2	1.51	.2203

* The unequal n required a general linear models procedure. The analysis presented here is based on the Type IV Sum of Squares, the more conservative of the two Sum of Squares provided by the GLM procedure.

Table 2--Means for the Variables of Interest

Variable	Mean Grade*	# of Subjects
Male Students		
Enrolled in Speech Communication Survey Course	7.349	103
Enrolled in Mass Communication Survey Course	5.408	98
Enrolled in Public Speaking Performance Course	4.677	353
Female Students		
Enrolled in Speech Communication Survey Course	6.473	93
Enrolled in Mass Communication Survey Course	5.328	116
Enrolled in Public Speaking Performance Course	3.875	257

* Grades were assigned the following values:

1 = A
2 = A-
3 = B+
4 = B
5 = B-
6 = C+
7 = C
8 = C-
9 = D+
10 = D
11 = D-
12 = F

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